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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BEIRUT 003232

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NSC FOR ABRAMS/DORAN/MARCHESE/HARDING

E.O. 12958: DECL: 10/05/2016

TAGS: PGOV PREL PTER LE IS SY

SUBJECT: LEBANON: FOREIGN MINISTER SAYS HE WILL RECONSIDER ANTI-U.S. CAMPAIGN; MAINTAINS THAT INFORMATION ON ABDUCTED ISRAELI SOLDIERS IS UN RESPONSIBILITY

Classified By: Ambassador Jeffrey Feltman. Reason: Section 1.4 (b).

SUMMARY

¶1. (C/NF) Lebanon's Foreign Minister Salloukh gave mixed signals on whether he understands the potential cost of the recent campaign by pro-Hizballah forces to portray the recent conflict in Lebanon as an American operation. He initially failed to see the contradiction between issuing specious charges against the U.S., while at the same time asking it to lead the international effort to raise funds for the country's reconstruction. But eventually he admitted that the propaganda had gone too far. Salloukh similarly feigned incomprehension of the Ambassador's assertion that the GOL had an obligation to pressure Hizballah to act in accordance with international standards on the issue of the kidnapped Israeli soldiers. Salloukh initially tried to shift all responsibility to UNSYG Kofi Annan, but then relented and indicated he would see what could be done regarding whether the soldiers were still alive. On the still-unresolved issues of abducted minor AmCit Kelsey Klotz and our extradition request for the TWA hijackers, the Foreign Minister fell back on old, static positions. Salloukh did, however, state he would support an expeditious approval of the U.S.-Lebanon TIFA agreement. End summary.

¶2. (C/NF) FM Fawzi Salloukh, fresh from a extended diplomatic mission to Cuba, New York, Paris, Strasbourg and Berlin, met with the Ambassador and emboff on October 5 at the Ministry. Commenting that his trip had been long, but relatively successful, the Foreign Minister made special mention of the "excellent and unexpected" Department security he and President Lahoud had received in New York. He thanked the Ambassador and said he had sent a letter to the Secretary to express appreciation and admiration for DS agents in New York. FM Salloukh also inquired whether the Secretary's just-completed visit to the region had produced any results that might affect Lebanon, or even the larger Middle East Peace Process, but accepted that it was too early to draw any conclusions.

¶3. (C/NF) The Ambassador mentioned that the date for the proposed international donors' conference "Beirut I" was quickly approaching and expressed his hope that preparations were being made for a successful meeting. In response to whether the increasingly fractious political forces would allow Siniora's pro-reform government to proceed to the conference with the necessary authority, Salloukh indicated that the heated political discourse would soon subside, the speed of which would be contingent on movement on certain

issues: reconstruction, Ghajjar village, and a more inclusive approach to rule by the pro-reform majority.

RISKING INTERNATIONAL ASSISTANCE

¶4. (C/NF) Responding to the Ambassador's concerns that political rhetoric was hurting confidence in Lebanon, FM Salloukh said he understood that political tension could play havoc with Lebanon's economic recovery by driving away potential investors and keeping those who fled the country during the war away for extended periods. He said Lebanon risked losing "perhaps billions" in critically needed assistance if political immaturity and unrest prevail. Exhibiting an appreciation of modern news cycles, he admitted that Lebanon was "one international crisis" away from losing the attention of the world community. Salloukh stated that he would do "what he could" to ensure that Lebanon's delegation to the conference was unified and prepared.

¶5. (C/NF) The Ambassador called for a cessation of an orchestrated campaign to vilify the U.S. and its Ambassador over the recent conflict. FM Salloukh acknowledged that he and his Shia colleagues had exploited the situation and were consciously managing the malignant "(This war was) Made-in-America" media assault. Salloukh stubbornly defended the campaign by focusing on the still-continuing casualties from UXO accidents in the south and in Beirut's southern suburbs.

¶6. (C/NF) In response, the Ambassador reminded the Foreign Minister that he was playing a very risky game -- if the Foreign Minister and his political allies continued their dogmatic anti-American media effort -- he could not expect

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the U.S. to act as if nothing had changed. After several rhetorical volleys, Salloukh admitted that perhaps the attacks had gone too far and it was now time to lower their intensity. He said that he would speak with one of the more strident newspapers tomorrow and implied that language and tone would moderate.

FATE OF ABDUCTED ISRAELI SOLDIERS

¶7. (C/NF) The Foreign Minister was asked whether he saw any incongruity in the fact that Hizballah was holding abducted soldiers from a neighboring country and ignoring all international standards of treatment, right under the nose of the Government of Lebanon. He was asked whether this audacity was not in fact making the government appear weak and unable to control its territory.

¶8. (C/NF) FM Salloukh initially rejected all responsibility for the matter, insisting that UNSYG Kofi Anan "had clearly taken responsibility" for negotiating the release of the soldiers. Salloukh even argued that the SYG had admonished all other parties not to interfere in the process. The Ambassador countered that surely the Foreign Minister and several other members of the government could apply pressure on Hizballah to act with a modicum of decency and at least provide some "proof of life" to the soldiers' families. He reminded Salloukh that the Lebanese prisoners in Israel were not treated in the completely unacceptable manner that Hizballah was employing.

¶9. (C/NF) Clearly uncomfortable with the request (and mindful that his words would definitely be reported back to Hizballah), the Foreign Minister barely whispered, "I may make some effort, but I cannot promise anything." Salloukh continued to insist that the issue was primarily between Hizballah and the UN, but hinted that he understood the reasonableness of the request.

TWO POSITIONS THAT NEVER CHANGE...

¶10. (C/NF) Salloukh's discomfort continued when he was confronted with the long-unresolved humanitarian issue of the abducted minor U.S. citizen Kelsey Klotz, who was illegally transported to a Hizballah-controlled community more than two years ago. The Foreign Minister argued that the Internal Security Forces had been to the reported location of the abducted child in Baalbeck, but had found nothing. (Note: This version conflicts with earlier reports from the ISF, but perhaps FM Salloukh was speaking without full confidence in his facts. End note.) Salloukh argued, "I tried my best, (ISF Commander) General Rifi tried his best-- we do not know where she is." Salloukh even maintained that Hizballah doesn't know where the child is and is "surprised" by the continuous inquiries. But Salloukh acknowledged the injustice of the situation and promised he would look into the matter again.

¶11. (C/NF) The Foreign Minister grew more stubborn when asked for the status of our ongoing request for extradition of the four terrorist TWA 847 hijackers. Salloukh retorted, "where are they now?" implying that one or more of the terrorists may no longer be in Lebanon. But Salloukh then undermined his position by stating he had heard one of them "Marwan" was now stricken with cancer. He then refused to discuss the matter any further.

...AND ONE THAT DID

¶12. (SBU) Concerning the final bilateral issue, the status of the proposed TIFA, FM Salloukh stated that he fully understood the economic benefits of increased investment and trade with the U.S. He saw no reason why this mutually beneficial agreement could not be concluded expeditiously and assured the Ambassador it would have his full support in the Council of Ministers.

FELTMAN